

MESSAGE: “From Tower to Power”

Text: Acts 2:1-21 (Genesis 11:1-9)

Purpose: the purpose of this message is to heal miscommunication and division in our relationship with God and others by the power of the Holy Spirit.

Communication—the authentic connection between two human souls—is at the heart of our happiest and most meaningful moments of life. (pause) Miscommunication—the disconnect between two who can’t get on the same page together to save their souls—is often at the root of our greatest frustrations.

There was once a judge who was interviewing a woman regarding her pending divorce, and asked, “What are the grounds for your divorce?”

She replied, “About four acres and a nice little home in the middle of the property with a stream running by.”

“No,” he tried again, “I mean what is the foundation of this case?”

“It is made of concrete, brick and mortar,” she replied.

With a sigh, he began again, “I mean, what are your relations like?”

“I have an aunt and uncle living here in town, and so do my husband’s parents.”

“Do you have a real grudge?”

“No,” she replied. “We have a two-car carport and have never really needed one.”

“Please,” he continued with some frustration, “is there any infidelity in your marriage?”

“Yes, both my son and daughter have stereo sets. We don’t necessarily like the music, but the answer to your questions is yes.”

“Ma’am, does your husband ever beat you up?”

“Yes he does,” she responded with emphasis, “about twice a week he gets up earlier than I do.”

Finally, in great frustration, the judge asked, “Lady, why do you want a divorce?”

“Oh, I don’t want a divorce,” she replied, “I’ve never wanted a divorce. My husband does. He says he can’t communicate with me.”

Pentecost, as celebrated by Christians, is a restoration miracle of communication. It re-connects the human heart with the heart of God, and it sparks understanding between humans with diverse backgrounds and polarized views. To appreciate the dynamite game-changer that Pentecost ignites requires a return to the rupture of communication that fractured our relationships with God and one another.

When we sing the hymn “In the Garden,” specifically, “and he walks with and he talks with me and he tells me I am his own, and the joys we share as we tarry there none other has ever known,” we are singing about the paradise of an intimate relationship with our

Creator. To borrow a phrase, we are singing about ‘the way life should be,’ rather than ‘the way life is.’ We remember the Genesis account of how the first humans, Adam and Eve, ate of the forbidden fruit of the tree of knowledge of good and evil and subsequently tried to hide from God. The ripples of that trouble-stone hurled into the sea of humanity continue to haunt us with consequence, disunity and miscommunication. It continues into the next generation when Cain kills his brother Abel. In fact, the human condition becomes so fractured that God repents from creating humankind and allows mass destruction by flood, sparing only Noah, his family and the animals aboard an ark.

But there is a strange and rather-odd story in Genesis 11, which illustrates the alienation we too often experience from God and the seemingly insurmountable disunity that holds the peoples of the world in perpetual conflict. We call it, “The Tower of Babel.” In Genesis 11, we see an alliance of humans who join a common effort to distinguish themselves from all others by creating a tower to scale the heavens. It is a metaphor for the restless heart that gives up ‘seeking God’ in order to become ‘god’ by their own design and effort. In the biblical account, God visits the construction site to observe these “self-made men who worship their maker.”

Aware of the consequences that follow unified and effective idolatry, God frustrates their building enterprise by scrambling the common language. Worker no longer understands worker, and each desperately seeks others like him or her at the expense of any who are different. The tower is abandoned, aborted even, as people scatter to different points of the compass. The biblical story serves as an ancient explanation for the differences and divisions that exist on planet earth. When the story of God’s relationship with humanity resumes, it is a relationship with a chosen people distinct from others on earth.

But here’s the thing. This saving of some on Noah’s ark, this saving of some through Moses’ Law, this saving of some through David’s Israel, this saving of some through John’s baptism, was never meant to be the sum total of God’s amazing grace. For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but that through him, the WORLD would be saved...

...which brings us to Pentecost. As one of the high holy pilgrimage festivals, the Jewish Pentecost, the Feast of Weeks, brought people to Jerusalem from all over the Hellenistic world—people with a bouquet of languages trying to communicate in the language of worship. The miracle of communication and understanding they would soon witness would domino across the canvass of the ancient world to gentiles as well and on into the centuries of our own experience. Witnesses of Christ in Jerusalem, Judea and Samaria and to the uttermost parts of the earth.

I invite you to read along with me from the Acts of the Apostles, chapter 2, verses 1-21 (Read text).

I ask you to notice the change that comes upon the disciples when they are baptized by the Holy Spirit with tongues of fire. Before this day, they are a small band of Jesus-followers hiding—literally hiding for fear of their lives. They hold out in a room with locked doors, fearful of betrayal, lest they be incarcerated or crucified as Jesus had been. They do not know what to do with the teachings and memories they have of Jesus. They do not know what to do with the fact that he has ascended to heaven, leaving them to live out their days as outcast-zealots of Judaism, unwelcome among Jews, Samaritans, Romans, Gentiles, or even the blind, the lame or lepers for that matter.

But then...they hear the sound like the blowing of a violent wind from heaven and it fills the house where they are gathered. Tongues of fire separate and ignite the disciples like the candles of a menorah. All of them are filled with the Holy Spirit and they begin to speak in other tongues: Parthians, Medes, Elamites, visitors from Mesopotamia, Judea, Cappadocia, Pontus, Asia, Phrygia, Pamphylia, Egypt, Libya, Rome, Cretans, Arabs. Who says the grace of God is restricted to some and not others? Who says it is only for the Chosen? For by grace you have been saved through faith! It is the gift of God, not of works, so that no one may boast!

This Pentecost trumpets the Easter miracle to every soul, every nation, every generation, every broken heart! This Pentecost replaces the Tower of Babel with the Power of the cross! This Pentecost turns strangers into friends, refugees into family, even enemies into companions along life's way. This Pentecost shows that love can triumph over every obstacle that divides. This Pentecost gives birth to the Church of Jesus Christ which is open to people of all ages, nations and races.

Now. Let's be frank. What does the Church of Jesus Christ look like today? To the world? To us? Does it speak of unity, compassion and unfailing love? (pause) There are those who insist that the only way forward for the United Methodist Church is divorce between conservatives and progressives. We've witnessed it in the Anglican communion, in the Congregational tradition, in the Presbyterian Assembly. Even in our own history, we've seen division north and south of the Mason-Dixon line which endured for a hundred years before the unity of the Spirit of Christ brought us together again in Christian harmony. Is divorce the only denominational option for those who cannot agree on the ethics of human sexuality?

No. No. A thousand times no! There is a better way to keep the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace. The Apostle said it well, "If I speak in the tongues of man and of angels. But

have not love, I am only a resounding gong or a clanging cymbal. Love does not delight in evil but rejoices with the truth. It always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres. Love never fails.”

The witness of Pentecost can heal the Christian Church, the United Methodist Connection and it can heal you and me, too. It can help us remember there is a person inside that point of view we disagree with so much. It can remind us that Christ gave his life for both of us. It can teach us to forgive, and to go the distance in relationship, even when we don't see eye to eye.

When my maternal grandfather died, my Mom left for the day with her brothers, sister and mother to make arrangements. My Dad stayed home, not by his choice, to supervise the lot of us who were putting a new roof on the homestead barn. He was grieving and deeply hurt not to be included in the plans. My Mom arrived home late at night and did not understand why he was upset. After all, she had lost her father, yet still gave Dad the freedom to accomplish the work he had scheduled. I had listened to them both, knew how deeply they loved one another, yet heard their disparate loneliness. Healing came through communication as they shared their honest feelings with one another. It was a powerful lesson for me and one Pentecost proclaims with eloquence.